



Breath of Life:

Breathing Techniques to Calm the Mind
in a Chaotic World

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The Breath of Life:

Those First Few Breaths

Breathing is so fundamental to our health on so many levels. I feel very fortunate that my first experiences with yoga 37 years ago introduced me to this concept in a big way. I was introduced to yogic breathing as a 17 year old. The results of this first experience were very profound. My consciousness was immediately transformed at 17 and has not been the same since. As a result of my first experience with conscious breathing, I became aware of the infinite potential for transformation of my consciousness that lives inside my body 24 / 7. This was extremely eye opening for me as a child of 17 since previously I felt 100% limited by my own shortcomings. The breath immediately taught me that there is another way. It gave me an immediate sense of hope. It gave me an immediate glimpse into an entire world of possibility that existed right inside my body!

It was this first experience that got me hooked on yoga at 17.

As a junior in high school, I was introduced to yoga by the mother of a school mate. One day after school, I went over to my friend Karen's house to hang out. Her Mom cheerfully greeted us and began to tell us of her recent experience of taking yoga lessons with her teacher who she referred to as "Yoga Helen." Mrs. Berger talked to us about yoga for quite some time, with great passion in her eyes and voice and I became totally intrigued by everything she was saying. Previous to this, I had absolutely no knowledge of yoga except as maybe some weird, esoteric thing from India.

Mrs. Berger was so generous in her sharing. I can still remember this day so vividly (from 37 years ago) as if it were yesterday. We moved from the kitchen to the living room where Mrs. Berger proceeded to demonstrate and explain the yoga postures. What really sticks out in my mind is how she demonstrated something she called The Sun Salutation and preceding each movement she would say either "Inhale" or "Exhale."

I don't remember any other breathing instructions but just the mention of inhaling and exhaling with each movement was an entirely novel concept to my young, impressionable mind.

Here are a few more interesting memories from that day. Mrs. Berger told us that Yoga Helen was 50 years old and could stand on her head! In my mind I remember thinking that my Grandma was like 50 years old and I sure could not imagine my Grandma standing on her head! This Yoga Helen seemed like some kind of a Goddess!

And then Mrs. Berger taught us how to stand on our heads. I have been practicing this yoga headstand ever since that day (and I am now 53 years old – even older than Yoga Helen!) I also learned that you could meditate by staring at a candle flame (Mrs. Berger demonstrated this) and she told us that Yoga Helen ate sunflower seeds and Tiger's Milk Bars and drank buttermilk and apricot nectar in order to stay healthy. Back in 1970 we were still very much living on a diet of cheeseburgers, milk shakes and Coca Cola, so this all seemed very novel indeed.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, this first experience with yoga was to have a profound affect on my life for years to come. It still amazes me to think that this first yoga experience happened to me totally by chance a simple twist of fate.

Back to the Breath

Based on this brief introduction to yoga (although brief, it was very comprehensive – she taught us Shoulderstand, Fish Pose, Sun Salutations and Headstand!) I became entirely curious about this thing called Yoga. I somehow managed to get my hands on a paperback book (I probably paid all of 35 cents for this book) written by Richard Hittleman on yoga for beginners. I literally devoured this book with lightening speed, practically memorizing it page for page.

I have one very vivid memory from this time in my life. I was sitting in the big bedroom upstairs in our house (this was a spare room built for my stepsisters who visited on weekends.) I may have been visiting home for the summer after my first year in college.

Anyway it was around dinnertime and I was sitting on the floor reading that book by Richard Hittleman. He gave a very detailed description of proper breath technique for yoga and there was a beginner's exercise which I was attempting to master. As I recall the process was something like: Inhale to the count of 5, Hold for the count of 3, Exhale to the count of 5. You were instructed to sit cross legged with eyes closed and to practice this for several minutes. And practice I did!

Personal Transformation

This was the beginning of my transformation with yoga. This was probably the first time I had ever attempted an introspective practice like this. And my consciousness was immediately transformed to another realm entirely. I was totally relaxed and totally present in my body probably for the first time ever in my life! How could I not get hooked on this feeling? Of course it was immediately interrupted by my Mom who began calling my name from downstairs: "Diane - - come downstairs and set the table for dinner . . ." "OK, Mom" I replied - - just 5 more minutes . . ."

Well 5 minutes likely turned into 10 minutes (after all I was in a bliss state!) And the next thing I know she was screaming at me: "Stop contemplating your navel and get down here right now and set the table!" Whew! Boy was she pissed. Of course I got my butt up off the floor and went through the motions of being a productive member of my family and somehow suffering through the family ritual that we called dinner - - (more on my family dynamic in another issue.)

My Journey Towards the Breath Continues . . .

My next introduction to yogic breathing was in my sophomore year of college at New Paltz. I was walking across campus and happened to see a sign on the door of a building that said: Free Sundown Yoga class – 6 PM. Wow! A free yoga class right on campus! I made a mental note of the location and attended class that night. Attending this free daily class became a regular part of my life during that year. This was my first ever experience with a formal yoga class and this was clearly the real thing! The class was organized by a group of disciples practicing Kundalini Yoga who lived at an ashram not far from the campus. Many of the participants in the class were dressed in traditional garb, all in white and wearing white turbans. The atmosphere in the class was 100% spiritual. I'll never forget my first time there. I walked into a dimly lit room full of people dressed in white, all sitting on the floor cross legged and it was perfectly quiet except for the sounds of very very fast, heavy and loud breathing noises being emitted from the various participants. I had never heard anything like this before in my life. Yes the whole scene did seem a bit odd, a bit weird but at the same time I felt welcomed

by the leader, a tall thin Asian man, Sunder who gave me a warm smile as if to say: “Everything is OK.”

I proceeded to learn the basic breath technique that they were all practicing, called Breath of Fire and once again I felt immediate and tangible results from this very intense and wonderful practice. Because I attended this class daily for that whole year, I became very proficient in Breath of Fire and continue to include this practice as an important part of my sadhana (daily practice) to this day. At the time I was about 19 or 20 years old.

The Here and Now

Yogic breathing has always been an extremely important part of my connection to yoga. For me, it's the breath that defines the yoga practice. Practicing yoga without breath awareness is akin to someone trying to dance without music. It can be done but it's certainly a lot more affective to dance to music. So if you are practicing yoga with little or no concept of breathing, you may get some results from the practice but those results will remain superficial at best.

How to Breathe

Below are some techniques that I have found to be extremely useful both in a formal yoga practice and also in the yoga off the mat or what could be called the yoga of life.

The Complete Yoga Breath (Sometimes called Dirgha Pranayama and Three Part Breath) For beginners, practice this lying down on the floor with hands placed at the upper belly (between the ribcage and navel.) Experienced students may sit cross legged on the floor or practice sitting upright in a chair or on a stool.

Begin by simply observing your breath on both the inhale and the exhale. Allow your mind to follow each and every breath. Then begin consciously breathing through the nostrils only and minimizing any tendency to breathe through the mouth. It is imperative that you are breathing through the nostrils and not the mouth if at all possible. Now begin to relax your whole belly from the lower ribcage all the way down to the pubic bone. Begin to slow down the breath as much as possible without straining in any way.

Notice that as the belly expands on the inhale, the hands rise with the belly. Notice that the belly gently falls back down on the exhale. Continue to notice and follow this rhythm: expansion & contraction and staying aware of the movement of the belly with the breath.

Now expand your awareness to include the expansion of the lower ribcage on each inhale. Then let your mind experience expansion through the middle ribs and chest and finally notice expansion at the upper chest all the way to the collarbone. On each breath you can feel the breath moving from the low ribs to the middle ribs and finally to the upper chest. With each exhale you can experience the breath moving in the opposite direction. There is a feeling of contraction or an emptying of the air first at the upper chest, then at the middle chest and ribs and finally at the low ribs and belly. This contraction or emptying happens on each exhale. This is the Complete Yoga Breath, also know as the Three Part Breath. Deep expansion occurs on every inhale and there is a gentle contraction and feeling of emptying the lungs completely with each exhale.

Use this breath whenever you need to relax and center your mind. If you are preparing to sit for meditation, use this breathing technique for 5 minutes before beginning to meditate.

Ujayi Breath

I did not discover Ujayi Breath (literally Victorious Breath) until I took my teacher training at Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health. I had been practicing the Three Part Breath on a regular basis for 32 years when I attended my first teacher training. After learning Ujayi Breath I found that I could enter a state of relaxation more quickly and more deeply than I could by practicing the Three Part Breath alone. I think the Three Part Breath is a great place to begin. Before attempting Ujayi Breath you should be very comfortable with the Three Part Breath.

As you practice Three Part Breath begin to narrow or contract your throat very slightly to create a hissing sound on both the inhale and the exhale. This is Ujayi Breath.

You may find that this deepens your state of relaxation. Get in the habit of practicing both Three Part Breath and Ujayi Breath as a centering technique before you begin your asana practice. And then attempt to maintain the Ujayi Breath throughout your entire yoga practice – letting it go only as you lie down for shavasana. For shavasana, just let go of the breath completely.

The Physiology of Breathing

The following information supports the yogic ideal that breathing through the nose supports the health of our nervous system and helps to create an overall state of optimal health and well being.

Below are excerpts from the web site www.authentic-breathing.com, authored by Dennis Lewis of Authentic Breathing Resources LLC. Please visit the web site for additional resources.

Importance of Nostril Breathing

When we breathe through our nose, the hairs that line our nostrils filter out particles of dust and dirt that can be injurious to our lungs. If too many particles accumulate on the membranes of the nose, we automatically secrete mucus to trap them or sneeze to expel them. The mucous membranes of our septum, which divides the nose into two cavities, further prepare the air for our lungs by warming and humidifying it.

Another very important reason for breathing through the nose has to do with maintaining the correct balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in our blood. When we breathe through our mouth we usually inhale and exhale air quickly in large volumes. This often leads to a kind of hyperventilation (breathing excessively fast for the actual conditions in which we find ourselves). It is important to recognize that it is the amount of carbon dioxide in our blood that generally regulates our breathing. Research has shown that if we release carbon dioxide too quickly, the arteries and vessels carrying blood to our cells constrict and the oxygen in our blood is unable to reach the cells in sufficient quantity. This includes the carotid arteries which carry blood (and oxygen) to the brain. The lack of sufficient oxygen going to the cells of the brain can turn on our sympathetic nervous system, our "fight or flight" response, and make us tense, anxious, irritable, and depressed. There are some researchers who believe that mouth breathing

and the associated hyperventilation that it brings about can result in asthma, high blood pressure, heart disease, and many other medical problems.

Breathing From the Belly

To breathe naturally and authentically, our belly needs to be supple. It needs to be able to expand on inhalation and retract on exhalation. This bellows-like movement of the belly supports the downward and upward movements of the diaphragm. When the belly expands on inhalation, the diaphragm can move farther downward into the abdomen, allowing the lungs to expand more fully. When the belly retracts on exhalation, the diaphragm can move further upward, helping the lungs to expel gases more fully. The increased downward and upward movements of the diaphragm, along with the outward and inward movements of the belly, not only help to slow down our breath rate and to take in oxygen and release carbon dioxide more efficiently, but they also help to massage all our internal organs, including the heart. This "internal massage" has a healthful impact on digestion, elimination, blood flow, the immune system, and the nervous system. People who are shallow breathers either by habit or by design lose these many benefits of deep breathing, or what we sometimes call "belly breathing."

More Supportive Evidence for Nostril Breathing Versus Mouth Breathing

According to John Douillard in his book *Body, Mind & Sport*, breathing through the nostrils stimulates the Parasympathetic Nervous System which has the affect of calming and relaxing the body. Also according to Douillard that is why simple breathing exercises are so effective in helping to deal with anxiety and other disorders of the nervous system. There is also evidence to support that when we breathe through the mouth we are stimulating the sympathetic nervous system which is the fight or flight response. Therefore chronic mouth breathing can lead to a chronic state of tension and anxiety.

Taking the Yoga off the Mat

Over the course of the past 4 years since I began teaching yoga and especially over the course of the past 2 years since I began teaching yoga full time I have begun to notice some major changes in my general state of mind and my general outlook on life.

When I first graduated from Yoga Teacher Training in 2002 I did not feel ready to begin to teach yoga. Largely, I felt that my posture practice was not advanced enough to qualify me to be a yoga teacher. In addition I feel that a yoga teacher is more than someone who instructs others on the technical aspects of yoga asana practice. To me a yoga teacher should be a role model for Living Yoga. So for that first year after I completed my Teacher Training, I spent much of my free time with my sadhana (daily practice of yoga.) My sadhana consists mainly of the coordination of deep yogic breathing (mainly Ujayi Breath and Breath of Fire) with the asana practice (yoga postures.) I generally practice for a minimum of 2 hours per day. During that first year, I found that through the practice of attempting to perfect my postures, I learned some hard lessons. I found out that in order to progress in the yoga asanas, a great deal of self discipline and perseverance is required. And so I cultivated those qualities during that first year. I was able to focus on my weak points without succumbing to self-judgement or any type of negative self talk. I embodied an attitude of total self acceptance and self love, practicing

ultimate patience combined with perseverance in overcoming obstacles. The fuel that fed this fire for that first year was the power of the breath. In yoga we refer to this fire of self discipline as *Tapas*.

I believe that much of our power to overcome obstacles in our lives comes from the ability to calm the mind by using some of the above mentioned breathing techniques. To review these techniques:

1. Nostril breathing if at all possible
2. Awareness of the Breath at all times
3. Long slow deep breathing from the belly
4. Ujayi Breath

The above 4 practices are a winning combination that will begin to kindle the fire of *Tapas*, enabling you to face your problems dead on squarely instead of running and hiding . . . (as I did for many years -- more on that story later . . .)

Once you are able to face your problems squarely and look at them and sit with them --- eventually the solutions arise . . . as if out of nowhere . . . perhaps the creative potential - - the prana shakti - - is hidden somewhere within the breath.

Try it out and see for yourself. What do you have to lose?

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I invite your questions, comments and feedback on the Om City Soap Box Volume 1.



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Om City Soap Box: Free E-Zine published and edited by yogini Dee Greenberg.

All articles authored by Dee except where otherwise noted. Dee Greenberg holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Education from the State University College of New Paltz, New Platz, NY. Dee is a Certified Kripalu Yoga Instructor and in addition has completed 200 hours of teacher training in Prana Vinyasa Flow with her current teacher and mentor Shiva Rea. Dee Greenberg began teaching yoga in Metro Boston in 2003 and has taught at health clubs, yoga studios and in corporate environments. Additionally she teaches private sessions one on one. Dee Greenberg owns and manages Om City Yoga of

Cambridge, MA which she launched in January of 2006. In addition to managing the studio, Dee currently teaches 15 or more classes per week and has been practicing yoga for the past 37 years.

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